

On Revision

The beauty of revising a poem is that the process doesn't have to end. Our experiences in this world tend to be discrete: one has an orgasm or eats a meal or a day turns into night. There will be (one hopes) another orgasm or meal or day but that particular experience is not going to happen again. Time wins. In revising a poem, however, time falls into abeyance. It is manifestly there—the poet gets older, the page turns yellow, the diskette is replaced by a hard drive—but the poem still beckons and can be changed. Not merely changed but bettered, that elusive end that does not necessarily have an end. There is, of course, the basic ending: the poet finally or not so finally dies. Still, one can imagine someone else picking up the poem and beginning to revise. I read that Robert Lowell made a practice of it, tackling the likes of Milton. Why not? Perfection isn't human so everything remains on the table. Couldn't—to choose a well-known poem—Frost have done better than “downy flake” in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening?” Of course, he could have.

I speak from the experience of recently having assembled a collection of poems that spans thirty or so years of writing. I was less than happy with many of the poems that had appeared in books. There were lines that were fuzzy. There were places where the language wasn't physical enough. There were places where the sound or rhythm (or both) lapsed. There were endings that I used more than once. Occasionally there was sheer baggage in a poem—too many words. In at least one case the poem's form was ill-conceived. There were junctures where I was on automatic pilot and not attending closely enough to what I had created. And there was the simple but endlessly perplexing and beguiling issue of this word or that word. Surely, I thought, there has to be a better word than the one I had used as the third word in line eight. There has to be. In that dictionary beside my desk lurks the word that will fulfill and surprise and belong and not call attention to itself while standing out as the unquenchable word. Or I can make up a word. that beckoning promise is the premise of the whole endeavor—for me, at least.

Donald Justice, a perfectionist's perfectionist, once published a book of interviews and writings about poetry entitled *Platonic Scripts*. In reference to the book's title, he noted that “I have a sort of Platonic notion that somewhere ideally exists the poem I'm trying to write, if only I can find it...” This may seem, as Justice would have been quick to aver, somewhat far-fetched, both literally and figuratively. In its endless pursuit of an ideal, such an approach seems a recipe for frustration. I daresay that Justice would have nodded rather happily about the frustration. Poetry, if one wants to push it to even a modest limit, is a very hard art and to quote Justice again, “one of the reasons poems seem easier to write when you're starting out is that you don't know enough to see how hard they are...” I can attest to that for as I have grown older I have come to realize how each word is tuned to every other word and that accordingly even a little lyric opens a door into infinity—a daunting place.

I don't think, however, that revision is masochism and I don't think Justice felt that. On the contrary, the pleasures of revision are more than considerable. To be sure a dull torment is going on as the poet senses this or that is amiss but isn't sure how to make it better. There is a certain

degree of pure blundering, more than once ineptitude has, whether out of desperation or fatigue, seemed inspired. Happily, another, withering day dawns in which to cross out the infelicity and try again. But the pleasures are genuine. There is the sheer sense of challenging one's self. This isn't an issue of that moral improvement that presents a specious and ultimately dismissive way of looking at artistic effort. Rather it's the feeling that one can truly do better, that one has it within one's self. Revising makes a person larger than smaller—not with ego but with determination and insight. Revising makes a person aware of how vast imagination is and how the poem that one has launched on that sea may be small but is not insignificant. One accesses something much larger than one's self. It's understandable how the Platonic realm beckoned to Justice in regards to revision. To practice the art of possibility as something more than roulette is scintillating. As the poet changes a line or word or stanza or beginning or form, the poet is fingering a possibility made actual. In place of the heady, often pell-mell groping of the first draft, something calmer yet equally intuitive is happening.

The poet has all the time in the world. No one in the poetry department is screaming for new product. Of course, since the poet is on some emotional errand or another in writing a poem, an impetus is present. That impetus, however, melds into the goad of furthering the poem into its most achieved form. Since the poet doesn't know what that form is—even in writing a sonnet the form is merely the starting point not the end—there is an element of chance involved. The poet's task is, at once, to accept the chance and eliminate it. In this sense poets often talk about the life of the poem, as if it were a sentient creature walking around commenting on the weather and the next election. This may seem bizarre; after all, a poet is writing the poem. The poem is not writing itself. However, since the poem is something created and thus in flux, the notion of the poem having its own life is understandable. Once words are written down, certain qualities of language are evinced—tone, diction, syntax—which signal predilections. These may be welcome or unwelcome to the poet but they are genuine and have to be dealt with in another draft. The poem is a manifestation, what it is a manifestation of is up to the reviser as he or she queries the page.

Accordingly, revision is an act of divination, of trying to find the right path among many plausible paths. “Way leads on to way,” the great reviser Robert Frost once put it. One can read “The Road Not Taken” as an exemplar of many facets of human behavior but one is the sheer decisiveness we cannot avoid as we take this or that action. One cannot have it both ways; one must choose this word not that one, this road not that one. The air of ruefulness and determination Frost's poem embodies seems just. Frost, as is his wont, is poking fun at the habits of human certainty. The narrator will be “telling this with a sigh.” That “sigh” is the sign of resignation and wanting and possible regret and sheer emotional embroidery of what could not be avoided in any case. In daily conversation we say “one way or another” but we rarely examine what is involved in that phrase. It is a palliative. Poems do examine.

This sounds fairly rational. Frost was well aware of reason as a necessary hoax, filigree on the darker cloth of custom and instinct that he pictures in “Mending Wall” where his neighbor stands “like an old-stone savage armed.” We invent reasons, which is why commentaries by poets on

their poems often have a spurious feel to them. After the fact, we can say anything but the mix of the facts that lead to the published poem is hard to parse out because they are not facts but moods and insights. And who is to say the published poem is an end? I speak from the experience of revising poems for decades, a number of which have already appeared in books. They lure me on. Though I am a good-natured soul, I have the habit of dissatisfaction in regards to art. I distrust the glow of the commendatory ego. As Donald Justice put it, “I like to get things right.” This is a no-nonsense statement but as it leads one on it can seem utterly senseless. When does one know that one has achieved the semi-blessed state of completion? We are aware of many cases where the poet makes the poem worse by padding it or cutting it to its graceless bones. Progress is hardly inevitable.

The answer to the question is that one never knows. Anyone looking for a diagram or floor plan in regards to revising a poem is in trouble for there is none. One can offer fairly sane approaches as in first expand, then contract or begin another draft at another place in the poem from where you originally began or don't be wedded to the first impulse or—the most basic advice—don't think at the outset that you know what you are writing about. Nonetheless, the pragmatic American impulse that has given the pedagogical world the gift of the poetry workshop only goes so far. Such instructions as I have listed above are directions not maps. The process of revision is terribly personal for it asks us to shape our enthusiasms, something we are not accustomed to doing. It is not that the poem is intractable. It is the opposite: the poem is too tractable. It will never protest. For all its articulate splendor, it is mute.

Each word in a poem is a world. The poet is someone who is trying to allow each word its full potency or even more than that, to recover what is lost in daily usage and let the word reclaim its potency. Each word, as Emerson noted, is a fossil poem. It is the task of the poet to honor the words by creating situations where they are able to regain some of that primal force. Yet it is also the job of the poet to bring the words into some sort of concert, to make them work together, which is to say talk to one another, influence one another, echo one another. The poem is a concord. There are endless shades of this harmony but the poet seeks in each poem to establish some tuning that can stand on its own, that resonates in the auditor's mind and spirit in ineffable ways. Who can say really how sound and rhythm affect us? For all our ratiocinative powers we cannot answer. This impossibility of standing outside of the work of art and offering an explanation is part of the lure of revision. I can hone it and hone it and hone it and then crumple it and bend it and veer and cut and lengthen. The caring that the endeavor calls forth is sublime and ridiculous. The poem remains indifferent, words on a page or a screen. I, for one, love that indifference. Nothing is given to me except for the fact of language, which is everything. Something is calling to me. I can hear it. It is indistinct but how could it be otherwise?